

A Ripple to a Wave

March 7th.

To most people, that's just today's date, but for Tara, it's the anniversary of when her world came crashing down.

Tara stares at the hateful date on her phone screen before clenching her hand into a fist. Shoving her phone into her coat pocket, Tara pushes her way through the crowd into the coffee shop, the one she used to visit with her mother before the accident.

She ignores the people nodding at her as she enters, unwilling to acknowledge anyone. *Be kind, Tara*, her mother reminds her whenever Tara isn't empathetic towards other people's problems. At least, that's what her mother had always said before a drunk driver had robbed Tara of her mother. *Be kind, Tara. Kindness changes everything.*

Tara refuses to acknowledge the memory of her mother either, an ache forming in her heart as she recalls her words. She looks around while she waits instead, focusing on a young girl giggling over a steaming cup. She sees a younger Tara in the window booth across from her smiling mother. She—

"Tara! Is that you?" a voice rings out from behind Tara, pulling her away from her thoughts.

She spins around, her eyebrows furrowing at the sight of a man, the owner of the voice. "Um, hello," Tara says. *I know him, but how?*

His eyes crinkle. "I'm Carlos, remember? Your lab partner from 9th grade biology?"

Tara doesn't attempt a smile, afraid it might turn out more like a grimace, as she silently appreciates her mask. "Oh, yes, I remember."

Carlos doesn't seem to notice Tara's discomfort as he continues, "It's been so long! I'm glad I ran into you here. I'm actually heading off to a job interview after this, otherwise, I would've loved to stay and catch up."

Tara nods, not knowing what to say. *Wish him luck, Tara! It's how others would respond*, her mother's voice insists. Tara shakes off this thought, reluctant to add anything else.

"I'm just so anxious for my interview," Carlos chuckles to himself. "I've been trying for this position for a year, but now that they've finally considered me, my nerves are killing me. Anyways, I hope a cup of coffee will give me some energy!"

Offer him reassurance! she hears her mother again. But Tara remains silent as Carlos carries on, merely bobbing her head until it's her turn to pick out a drink from the menu.

Guilt rushes through Tara's veins as she replays the scene repeatedly in her mind, but Tara tries to push it aside. *It's not that big of a deal. Besides, today of all days, I'm allowed to act how I want*, her internal thoughts cloud her mind.

Be kind, Tara, her mother whispers, voice as sweet as a lullaby. *You're not the only one having a rough day.*

“Can I have the next person in line, please?” the cashier calls out, getting Tara’s attention. Tara shuffles her feet towards the counter, then absentmindedly tells the cashier her order.

“Can I—” Tara starts, then shuts her mouth abruptly.

Be kind, Tara.

“Yes?” the cashier asks, puzzled.

Be kind, Tara.

“I would like to pay for the person behind me,” Tara tells the cashier without hesitation. *It’s the right thing to do*, she thinks to herself. She hands her credit card to the cashier, saying, “You can add five extra bucks to my total. Please keep the change!”

The cashier nods and types a few numbers into the register. “Okay!” she exclaims. “Anything else?”

“No,” Tara shakes her head. *Will Carlos appreciate it at all?* “Actually—” She pauses, contemplating whether she should keep her thoughts to herself or not. “Could you please tell him to continue sharing his kindness with others?”

If the cashier is confused, she doesn’t say anything. She merely nods and gestures for Tara to wait by the side for the barista to prepare her tea.

Tara smiles to herself, her guilt fading away. She was *kind*. It was harder for Tara to be kind and selfless these days, ever since the car crash had destroyed a part of her soul along with her mother. But the feeling—the emotion she felt now, after she’d done something *kind*, wasn’t as terrible as she had thought.

“Tara!” she hears the barista yell, pulling Tara out of her trance. She heads out the door after she grabs her drink, allowing for a genuine smile to bloom on her face for the first time in what feels like years.

Carlos sighs as he watches Tara walk away, his thoughts muddled with confusion. *Why was she acting so weird?* He had chatted about his life and his upcoming interview, trying to erase the awkwardness with small talk, but Tara still didn’t join in. It certainly didn’t help him get his mind off his interview. His clammy fingers continuously twist the corner of his shirt in a futile attempt to ease his nerves.

“Hello! What can I get you today?” the cashier nods, greeting him. Carlos tells her his order, pulling out a twenty from his wallet. “Oh, wait!” the cashier exclaims, stopping him. “The person in line ahead of you already paid for you. She told me to ask you to continue sharing your kindness with others.” Carlos startles, taking a step back.

“She did? Tara paid for my drink?” Carlos wonders out loud, running a hand through his hair, still bewildered. *Why would Tara do that for me? She didn’t even engage in our conversation. And what was that about sharing kindness?*

“She did!” the cashier says, fingers clicking away on a keyboard. Once he has coffee in hand and spirits lifted, Carlos walks out of the shop, humming a cheerful tune. An elderly man stands next to the curb, fumbling with his car keys while carrying a heavy box.

As Carlos gets closer, he notices the keys continually slip out of the old man’s grasp. *I’m getting late for my interview. Should I just let him figure it out by himself?* He flicks his wrist over and exhales deeply. *I have a few minutes, Carlos considers. Tara said to continue sharing kindness with others, and maybe, this was what she meant.*

“Excuse me, hello!” Carlos says, approaching the man. “I noticed you struggling a bit with that, so would you like some help?” The man nods and hands the keys to Carlos. Carlos takes it, and with a quick hand, opens the trunk in one go.

“Thank you, son,” the man’s voice quivers as he lifts his weary features to face Carlos. “What’s your name? I’m Tom by the way.”

“Carlos. It’s nice to meet you, Tom,” he says, taking a small breath before asking, “I know it’s not my place, but are you okay? You seem a bit tired.” *It’s definitely not my place. Should I dig deeper or ignore it?* Carlos thinks, unsure of what to do.

The man shakes his head. “It’s nothing, thank you though.” He looks away, shoulders slumped, then sighs. “I just miss my family, that’s all.” After a moment of hesitation, Tom adds, “You remind me of my daughter. I haven’t seen any of my kids in so long because of COVID-19.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t been able to see my mother in a while either, so I understand,” Carlos sympathizes, eyebrows knitted together in concern. “Don’t worry, things will return back to normal soon.”

“I sure hope so.” Carlos watches as Tom clears his throat and wipes a hand across his eyes.

“You do that,” he smiles, trying to brighten Tom’s spirits. “Mark my words, just keep that flicker of hope alive and you’ll be able to see your family in no time.”

Carlos notices a twinkle in his eyes as Tom’s face perks up. “Thank you. That’s nice of you. I’m already feeling more positive,” he says. “How can I repay your kindness?”

“It’s nothing,” Carlos smiles again, shrugging it off. “Just pay it forward whenever you can!” He backs away before exclaiming, “Have a great day!”

Tom pushes his cart filled with groceries towards the checkout counter. He whistles the same tune he’d heard the young man hum before, but then raised voices behind the counter catch his attention.

“I told you to sell the more expensive brands and stop ordering the cheaper options, Tara, so why is there a new shipment of the off brands that just showed up?” a man hisses at an employee, the muscles in his face twitching in fury. Undeterred, the employee glares back at him, her gaze not drifting under the man’s scrutinizing stare.

“Yes,” the employee – Tara – shoots back, “but customers keep asking for the cheaper options. Money is tight for many people right now, and it’s wrong to force them into paying more than they have to.”

“Don’t talk back to me and don’t worry about other people. You had one job, and you—”

“Well, I—”

“I think,” his lip quivers, “I’ve heard enough. You’re fired.”

Tara pales, the argument lost on her lips. “Sorry, I-I *need* this job. I’ll just help this customer and then put in the orders.”

“No. You’re done. Leave, n—”

“Excuse me,” Tom interrupts, appalled by the man’s behavior. “Sorry, but I couldn’t help listen to your conversation and I don’t think it’s fair to yell at your employee like that, especially when she didn’t do anything wrong.”

The man’s body shakes in rage, egotism rolling off him in ripples. “How *dare* you?” he bellows. “Get. *OUT*. Both of you!”

Tara feels the cold rush of wind prickling her face as she pushes herself out of the store, tears threatening to resurface. *How could I be so foolish? I should’ve just listened to him.*

“Hey,” Tara hears a voice pant from behind her, as her defender jogs to keep up. “My apologies for interrupting your conversation with your boss, but I wanted to talk to you about something. Is that okay?”

Tara nods for him to continue, biting her lip. “Yes, and thank you for standing up for me earlier. It means a lot.”

“It was my honor. I think all employees should be like you and care about what their customers need. And it was my civilian duty to stand up for what’s right.”

“I—thank you. I wish that others would recognize that though. If they did, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten fired today,” Tara pronounces softly. Her eyes stay focused on the roof of the building, trying to stay composed.

“Hey,” Tom starts, attempting to soothe Tara, “this happens. You should always remember that you weren’t fired because *you* did something wrong. You were fired because your *boss* was wrong. You, however, made a difference for others even though you may not personally see the results.”

Tara merely nods again, unable to say anything. “Actually,” Tom begins again, gears in his brain turning. “Would you be interested in working as an accountant for my daughter? She was telling me how she had to fire her last accountant because he wasn’t honest, and based on what I just heard, I think you’re just the type of person she’s looking for.”

Tara takes a sharp intake of breath. “Thank you! That would be amazing! Thank you so much! Wow—why—why are you helping me?”

“You don’t deserve this,” he says, waving to the store behind them. “All you did was act kindly towards others. The world needs more people who think of others first.”

Tara stares back at Tom; the almost unrecognizable emotion of deep joy filling her heart. She beams, creases on her face smoothing out.

Don’t you see? her mother’s voice gently questions. *Because you were kind to Carlos earlier, kindness found its way back to you.*

It does, doesn’t it? Tara whispers back. *Thank you, Mama. Thank you for teaching me how a ripple of kindness can become a wave.*